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ABSTRACT

The situation in the U.S. is different from that in England, France and other European countries: in each of those countries there is something that is known as the standard language, and a number of dialects apart from the standard language. There is also a rather close consensus on what the standard dialect is (especially on phonological lines). The situation in the U.S. is more complicated regarding standard speech. Several regional varieties exist, and within these are social varieties. There are, in addition, groups of people who speak a variety of English heavily enlarded with some other language. The most critical problem is the Negro in the large city slums whose speech is marked by striking phonological differences. The individual speaker will have to choose whether he wants to substitute the speech habits of the dominant culture for the habits of his own nonstandard dialect. The choice should be made available to him; he should not be made to live imprisoned with the nonstandard dialect all his life through lack of opportunity to move out of it into the standard dialect if he deems the move advantageous. More research, such as noted briefly here, is needed in analyzing white and Negro speech, before the standard dialect can be effectively taught. (Author/AMM)

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NOTES ON A TALK BY PROFESSOR RAVEN I. MC DAVID, JR. AT THE NCTE PRECONVENTION WORKSHOP, NOVEMBER 26, 1963, SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

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TEACHING STANDARD ENGLISH TO NON-STANDARD SPEAKERS

The situation in the United States is different from the situation in England, France and other European countries: in each of those countries there is something that is known as the standard language, and there are a number of dialects apart from the standard language. In European countries one finds an advantage that is not to be found here: in each of those countries there is rather close consensus on what is the standard dialect (especially on phonological lines). Here in the U.S. we have a more complicated situation regarding what is standard speech. Several regional varieties exist, and within these there are social varieties. Then, to make the sauce more piquant, we also have groups of people who speak a variety of English heavily enlarded with some other language.

If you are teaching English in Vietnam, to people who have no English to start with, you don't have to disentangle a new variety of English from an old variety.

AL 002 489

Let's strip off our euphemisms and say the most critical problem is the problem of the Negro in the slums of our large cities. The speech of Negro slum-dwellers is marked by striking phonological differences, and some kinesic differences such as more extensive arm movements. With regard to these differences people have made certain "cornfield observations" but we need more systematic observations.

It has been noted, for example, that a striking feature of Negro folk speech is the use of the uninflected third person singular (He go; he make him go). This is a socially conditioned morphological indicator that sets Negro slum-dwellers off from other groups, including second and third generation immigrants.

Many Negro students have an impressive creative drive. Experiments have shown that much can be accomplished by changing the environment of such students. Fred Strodtbeck's experimental nursery school enrolls 10-12 children from agency families and exposes them to 11 weeks of enriched environment to see what can be done in affecting IQ. There have been dramatic results: the average rise in IQ has been 15 points.

Strodtbeck's taped interviews with these children describe the environment out of which the students come: no books, the ever-present threat of violence. The children are told, "Don't talk to anyone, don't go out." So they don't even learn from other children. In the nursery school you don't hear the babble that is customary among normal 4-year-olds.

At Chicago we propose to take the Linguistic Atlas records of the Chicago area plus records made by Lee Pederson (now at the University of Minnesota) and analyze the tapes to identify features which distinguish white from Negro speech, and upper class from lower class -- including suprasegmentals and paralanguage. After that, we plan to put onto tape certain of the speech forms that have been clearly identified with the various populations. Next we will randomize in two different orders 100 items, some being controls -- things no one in

the populations has used. We will then try these tapes out in order to get reactions in terms of three degrees of pleasantness and three degrees of unpleasantness. Then we plan to run the tapes through again and ask people to identify the speakers as middle class Negro, middle class white, etc. Next we will try to determine the extent to which pleasantness and unpleasantness are associated with the different features.

This information is needed because the classroom teacher must concentrate on items that really do have value in discrimination. The final goal will be to devise ways of developing the speech habits of the dominant culture. Whether or not the individual chooses to substitute those habits for the habits of his own non-standard dialect will be up to the individual himself. He should be told, "If you want to get a job clerking in Marshall-Fields, you must get this kind of speech. What you do with your speech in your own community is your own business."

If the individual comes to feel comfortable in the middle-class dialect, he will probably drop the old one. If he wants to go back to the slums to operate a policy wheel, he may find the middle-class dialect an occupational liability. Then quite possibly he will choose not to speak it. The point is, the choice should be made available to him: he should not be made to live imprisoned within the non-standard dialect all his life through lack of opportunity to move out of it into the standard dialect if he deems the move advantageous.

But before we can effectively teach the standard dialect, we must know precisely what its distinctive features are, as contrasted with the dialect now spoken by these students. It might be possible to get out a pamphlet setting forth the significance of social dialects. Techniques for teaching the standard dialect will doubtless include more reading aloud by the teacher, more playing of phonograph records of the standard language of that region. (In the south there is less difference between folk speech and common speech than between common speech and cultivated speech. In the north there is more difference between folk speech and common speech than between common speech and cultivated speech.) In general, the techniques to be used for teaching the standard dialect to non-standard speakers will be much like those used in teaching English as a foreign language.

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